

Why do heroes in epic poetry visit the Underworld?

Eleanor Powers

The two great ‘wanderers’ of ancient epic had very little in common: one was returning to his home, one fleeing it; one a Greek and one a Trojan. Odysseus and Aeneas may have sailed through the same waters but they made very different journeys. Yet both took the time and trouble to visit the most feared place in any culture, the Underworld. These visits are not immediately necessary to either poem; they provide neither hero with any concrete gain – materially speaking, Phaeacia and Sicily are far more useful to the travellers. Instead, they are used by Homer and Vergil as elegant ways of inserting messages vital to their poems, whilst at the same time ensuring their heroes a place among the select few who not only enter the Underworld, but also ‘retrace their steps and escape to the upper air’.

Odyssean encounters – a prophet, his mother, some heroes, and a witch

Odysseus, always practical, visits the Underworld because the witch Circe tells him that the shade of the prophet Teiresias ‘will prophesy... how you will reach home across the teeming seas.’ Yet Teiresias fails to live up to this description; he tells Odysseus nothing that Circe does not later repeat when Odysseus returns to her and she imparts a great deal more information. What, then, is the function of these 640 lines of poetry? The first is that, in the series of adventures narrated by Odysseus himself to the Phaeacians, Homer has skilfully found a means of reminding the audience and Odysseus, of the situation awaiting him at home in Ithaca and the very real need for him to return there. Odysseus’ encounter with his mother, Anticlea, provides a touching first person description of his wife, Penelope, who ‘has schooled her heart to patience, though her eyes are never free from tears’ and of his father, Laertes, who lives in poverty, ‘nursing his grief and yearning for you to come back’. The true focus of the *Odyssey* is always the ‘real world’ of Ithaca, and Homer uses the Underworld episode to maintain this even during the ‘wonderland’ adventures of Odysseus.

Odysseus’ encounter with Anticlea also begins the chain of ‘filial enquiry’ which functions to expand on the theme of filial loyalty and filial love that runs throughout the *Odyssey*. When Odysseus meets two great heroes of the Trojan War, Agamemnon is desperate for information about his son, Orestes, just as Achilles is for news of his son, Neoptolemus, and his father, Peleus. This also ties in to Odysseus’ return home – will Penelope be as untrustworthy as Clytemnestra? Can Telemachus be as good a son as Orestes or Neoptolemus? This creates a sense of doubt about Odysseus’ return, but Achilles’ words, ‘If I could return for a single moment to my father’s house as I was then I could make those who forcibly rob him of his position of honour cringe before the might of my unconquerable hands,’ coming so close to Anticlea’s description of the impoverished Laertes, allow Homer to draw a subtle parallel between Odysseus, who will return to wreak vengeance on those who insult his house and father, and Achilles, the greatest hero of all. In visiting the Underworld, Odysseus can even be said to outdo Achilles: ‘What next, dauntless man?’, asks Achilles, ‘What greater exploit can you plan to surpass your voyage here?’ Odysseus, the first great traveller of western literature, almost visits the

Underworld because it is there to be visited, because Odysseus would be the last to refuse a challenge. This reassures us that, whatever the failings of others, Odysseus will rise to every situation and will inspire his family to the same.

Aeneas: voices from the past and heroes of the future

Homer indicates that Achilles and Odysseus, who are great and good men, hold love for their fathers very highly. This virtue, however, will always be Aeneas’ great characteristic and he, who carried his father out of Troy on his back, displays this quality of *pietas* again when he visits the Underworld. Aeneas is directed to Cumae, the mouth of the Underworld, by the prophecies of King Helenus of Buthrotum, so that he can consult the Sibyl, but the decision to enter the Underworld itself rests with Aeneas alone. Aeneas visits the Underworld solely in order to see his father Anchises, who died about a year earlier in Sicily. This is a touching example of Aeneas’ devotion in itself, but is also indicative of the sad fact that he has no one, apart from a young son, left who has not disappeared into ‘black Dis’. Unlike Odysseus, who progressively finds his loved ones, Aeneas must lose them, ‘so heavy was the cost of founding the Roman race’. But Aeneas has now reached Latium; he has the future to think about, he cannot brood on death or on his past any longer. Thus for Aeneas the events in the Underworld act not as reminders but as a means to forget, a means literally to bury the past.

He first meets his helmsman, Palinurus, who has died mere days before. Palinurus can be seen as representing the men Aeneas has lost on his travels, the followers that he feels responsible for. But Palinurus, the Sibyl explains, will not be forgotten; the Cape where he drowned will always bear his name. Thus Palinurus, though a casualty of the struggle to found Rome, will still form a part of that great nation. But not all who suffer for Rome are so lucky; Aeneas recognizes Dido ‘like a man who sees or thinks he has seen the new moon rising through the clouds at the beginning of the month’. This presents him with a new chance to remedy his failure in Carthage and make her understand why he had to leave her, but ‘grim-faced she kept her eyes upon the ground’ – she still will not forgive him. This meeting is perhaps the most human and tragic moment in the whole *Aeneid*. Vergil wisely refrains from letting the relationship end happily, but the encounter at least shows Aeneas that no explanation could have made Dido understand him; that in obeying fate he caused her suicide and could not have prevented it once he had made his decision to leave. Aeneas, ‘stricken’, moves on to meet Deiphobus, a Prince of Troy. Deiphobus is able to reassure Aeneas that, ‘You, my friend, have left nothing undone’, and that Aeneas is the ‘great glory of our Troy’. Thus the three great sources of guilt that have been troubling Aeneas – the sufferings of his followers, of Dido and of Troy, and whether he could have averted them – are, if not removed, at least laid to rest.

Having left the past behind, Aeneas is now given a great and motivational image of the future, for when Aeneas meets Anchises in Elysium, the ‘fields of the blessed’, his father tells him ‘of the glory that lies in store for the sons of Dardanus.’ Waiting in Elysium are the spirits who will one day be incar-

nated as the great Romans of the future, provided, of course, that Aeneas succeeds in founding his new nation. The 'parade of Romans' covers the semi-mythical Alban kings of Latium through to rulers that were Vergil's contemporaries, including of course the 'son of a god' Augustus Caesar. Vergil throughout the poem cleverly manages to discuss the 'future' glory of Rome in the story of its past, and that future glory must include Augustus Caesar at its forefront, the patron of the poem and the man who had stabilized the nation after years of devastating war. The Underworld has provided a perfectly plausible means for such men of the future to feature in the poem. Augustus, says Anchises, 'will bring back the golden years to the fields of Latium... and extend Rome's empire... to a land beyond the stars'. When such a man is promised to the new nation 'Do we still hesitate to extend our courage by our actions?' Anchises' rhetoric stirs Aeneas just as powerfully as it would have stirred contemporary Romans. Once roused to action, Aeneas is then told what this action must be: 'Your task, Roman, and do not forget it, will be to govern the peoples of the world in your empire. These will be your arts – and to impose a settled pattern upon peace, to pardon the defeated and war down the proud.' Vergil utilizes the visit to the Underworld as a transition between the two stages of the *Aeneid*, the searching for the new land and then the claiming of it, but also a vital transition for Aeneas from uncertain and troubled to emboldened and assured. With this great vision in mind, Aeneas is given new strength to go and face his 'second Achilles'.

Interpreting the Underworld: a place of transformation

Homer and Vergil dealt with the temporal sequences of the stories they told in a way which would daunt many a modern writer. The events at the end of each story (and in Vergil's case the 'end' was approximately a thousand years after the main events of the poem) are extremely important in appreciating the beginning, and both must somehow be worked into two narratives that 'start' in the middle. The Underworld, together with its inhabitants, is a perfect literary device for including the 'ends' – Ithaca and Rome – where they otherwise would not fit. Through their descriptions of the treatment of sinners and (in Vergil's case) the good, the poets also add the moral dimension which meant much to both, and they create instances of swift and delightful characterization which made them famous.

Yet the question is still asked, do the heroes ever visit the Underworld at all? Aeneas leaves his Underworld through the Gate of Ivory of 'false dreams' and should we be so quick to believe Odysseus' account of his adventures, when he so easily tells so many fictitious accounts in Ithaca? It is a measure of the psychological understanding of Homer and Vergil that we scarcely need worry if this is the case. Odysseus, when he tells the story of the Underworld, is looking back; Aeneas, until he reaches the Underworld, is also always looking back. It is no coincidence that both Underworld episodes occur in the middle of their respective poems – both heroes have spent half a poem journeying; now they must arrive and look to the future.

Perhaps 'visiting the Underworld' is a way of conveying that when the heroes purport to do so they are at their moment of greatest doubt and discouragement. The motif of descent into an Underworld was indeed interpreted by neo-Jungians as expressing depression 'psychopathic, paranoiac, catatonic'; the idea of 'whatever is below' symbolizing repressed fears and doubts 'that sense of depth that presses on us as depression, oppression, suppression' (Hillman *Dream and the Underworld*). Odysseus is living in comparative comfort on the distant island of Circe; his questions to Anticlea show that he is uncertain whether his wife has already remarried and abandoned him. Aeneas has just lost his father, caused the suicide of the woman he loved and has just been told that 'worse things remain for you to bear on land'. The temptation to die, not literally but as moral figures, as beings

with the integrity of their purpose, must be very strong. They descend into the Underworld, but being heroes they leave it again because, however terrifying the land of death, it takes a hero to accept the challenges of life.

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